

By Rep. Sanford D. Bishop, Jr.  
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It might surprise many Georgians that, despite unprecedented job growth in the Atlanta area over the past 15 years, agriculture is Georgia's largest industry, and still 1 out of 7 Georgians works in agriculture, forestry, or a related sector, according to the Georgia Farm Bureau. They contribute to the production of staple commodities included in some of our nation's most commonly-used products. In fact, Georgia leads the nation in peanut, poultry, and pecan production, and is among the top producers of cotton, corn, eggs, and tomatoes. It only makes sense, then, for our state's federal representatives to advocate for legislation to preserve this part of our state's economy.

This summer, my Georgia colleagues and I advocated fiercely for the inclusion of commodity support programs affecting Georgia agriculture in the 2007 Farm bill. Unfortunately, misconceptions about these programs threaten the future of our agricultural sector.

Many who lack a clear understanding see the cost of commodity support programs as unnecessary subsidies which preserve outdated policies that drain the federal budget. However, U.S. farm policy today costs less than one half of one percent of the total federal budget and comprises just 13% of the total U.S. Department of Agriculture budget. That proportionately small cost is well worth what is returned to the American people in terms of a safe, affordable, and robust food supply, a base on which to provide 20% of this nation's jobs, \$3.5 trillion in economic activity, and now, a platform from which to become energy independent.

Stripping away support for our domestic producers would be an unwise and regrettable decision. Doing so would make American consumers more reliant upon foreign producers, many of whom are only able to compete with us in the global marketplace because of much more generous government support from their countries than what is offered to U.S. producers by the USDA.

Additionally, foreign producers are subject to much less rigorous food safety inspection standards than domestic producers. Just recently, we heard startling accounts of lax inspection standards and unclean conditions in processing operations in China, which exports \$2.26 billion worth of food into our country each year. And, we have historically experienced problems with tainted produce imported from Mexico, some of which even reached our school lunch programs, endangering the health of American children.

Today's commodity support programs and other agricultural programs have come a long way from their Depression-era beginnings. "Subsidy" is an outdated and misleading term. Funds are disbursed according to the flux of the global marketplace for very specific and targeted purposes.

Despite opinions to the contrary, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is achieving a lot by spending a relatively small amount of cash. And, all of our citizens, especially those residing in states like Georgia where agriculture plays a vital role in the state's economy, are well-served by these programs.

The safety and security of our nation is dependent upon safe, high quality, and affordable food, fiber, and fuel produced in the United States. Elimination of the farm safety net by cutting the support programs will indeed compromise our national security.